

Testimony of Andrew Brunson

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Thanks to USCIRF

My experience in Turkey illustrates, and in some way epitomizes, how the Turkish government views Christians. The Erdogan regime has stoked an already deep-seated suspicion and animus towards Christians, and one of the ways they did it was through my case. There is still a high degree of freedom for Christians relative to other Muslim countries in the region, but I am concerned that all the signs point to this changing very soon.

I want to touch on some of the difficulties Christians in Turkey are facing.

1. The Turkish government has accelerated the expulsion of Christian foreigners from Turkey

The most pressing hardship the Turkish church has faced in the last couple of years is the expulsion of foreigners closely involved with the Turkish church. The Turkish government does not allow Christians to set up education and training programs to develop leaders. One result of this is a lack of trained pastors. Foreigners have helped to fill this gap. Over 50 Protestant families have had to leave the country in recent years, including several friends of mine.

I want to emphasize that the foreigners targeted for deportation are for the most part church leaders and pastors. Many churches have been negatively affected. In Izmir, where I served, five churches have lost their senior leaders. To put this in perspective, this is close to half the churches in that city of 4 million.

I could include myself along with my wife. We were originally arrested for deportation, as a threat to national security. Indeed, this is the reason the Turkish government gives for deporting these peaceful men and women - that they are a "threat to national security." A senior Turkish pastor wrote to me, "This means that Christianity is considered a threat to national security. This is a direct violation of religious freedom as it makes it impossible for Christians to live, to worship, to establish a church in Turkey."

Another Turkish leader wrote to me, "Some Turkish Christians have started to ask, 'After the foreigners are sent away, what will the government do to us?'" This is a good question.

According to some Turkish leaders there is “an expectation of an action from the government against Turkish church leaders. Arrest? Investigation? I don’t know.”

I think the accelerated deportation of church leaders is a sign of very dark times to come. Turkey is not there yet – but it is careening in the wrong direction.

2. My indictment and trial give an example of how the Turkish government views Christians:

When my indictment came out, it became clear that I had been targeted specifically because of my faith. My crime was “Christianization,” acting as “an agent of unconventional and psychological warfare” under the “guise of an evangelical church pastor.” All of our work was intended to fragment Turkey, they said, splitting it into pieces. Basically, the indictment was associating “Christianization” with terrorism, and presenting Christianity as a danger to Turkey’s unity. The senior judge explicitly said I was not on trial for missionary activity, but much of the supposed “evidence” presented against me as proof of supporting terrorism was our ministry activities. In the end, I was convicted of supporting terrorism and given a prison sentence.

The Turkish Association of Protestant Churches summarized my trial as follows: Pastor Brunson was subjected to accusations of evangelism, helping refugees, leading worship in several languages, and teaching the faith, all of which are regular activities for any church. It was claimed that he took part in these ministries in order to help the terrorist organization or as part of espionage activities.

The UN concluded my detention was because of my nationality and my faith

Less than two months after my release, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that the Turkish authorities targeted and arrested me on the basis of my nationality and faith. They confirmed that I was the victim of religious persecution and declared that the appropriate remedy would be to expunge my criminal record and accord me an enforceable right to compensation and other reparations. They urged the Turkish government to conduct an investigation and take appropriate measures against those who had violated my rights. Of course, this would involve the very top of the Turkish government. Finally, they urged the Turkish government to “disseminate the present opinion through all available means and as widely as possible.”

So far, the Turkish government has done none of these. The foreign minister still refers to me in public as a spy and calls me Agent Brunson. After the State Department report on religious freedom was published recently, the spokesman for

the Turkish Foreign Ministry insisted that “Pastor Brunson was convicted because of his affiliation with terrorism, not because of his faith.”

This is simply not true. I know that the Turkish government, especially at the highest levels, knew all along that I was innocent.

3. Government-fed media propaganda has created a very tense atmosphere for Christians.

I tasted a bit of this from the media in Turkey: The coverage was vile – that I was a terrorist, anti-Turkish, the head of the CIA in the Middle East, wanted to overturn the Turkish government and establish a Christian state by force. They called me Terrorist Priest; Spy Priest; Dark Priest; Rambo Priest. They ensured that the Turkish public thought of me as dangerous, evil, a traitor, and because of this I was despised and hated. And it hasn’t stopped. When a gunman killed fifty people in a mosque in New Zealand in March 2019, Turkish media suggested that I was the one who had given the killer his orders.

This is the new normal in Turkey. The Turkish media—behind which stands the Turkish government—used me to paint a public image of Christians as traitors, terrorists, and enemies of Turkey when nothing could be further from the truth. This deliberate propaganda campaign was intended to reinforce and heighten a negative image of Christians in the general population. The result has been a significant rise in hate speech against Christians - that is, incitement, threats, and dangerous slander. And in Turkey this is very, very dangerous because it has led to violence in the past.

The Turkish Association of Protestant Churches report for 2018 reads as follows: “There was a significant increase in public hate speech designed to incite the public to hatred of Protestants and in written or verbal hate attacks on Protestants and Protestant churches purely due to their beliefs in some national media outlets, in local media and in social media. Even more concerning, there was an increased coupling together of churches and terror organizations in news reports without any evidence or substantiation. . . The reporting of false-witnesses [including secret witnesses] as if they were true, and the refusal to allow use of the constitutional right of reply or correction in these publications causes serious concern to the named churches and individuals.”

The conditions have been created so that when the church is persecuted, when there is violence against Christians, most Turks will now say, “Yes, they deserve it.”

We are very proud of the small but brave Turkish church that continues to stand for Jesus in an openly hostile environment

Refer to 2018 Human Rights Violations Report by the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey.